

Falling

—"...If you could have it all, why do you want me?"

The Technicolors - Tonight You Are Mine

Est

The thing about patterns is that you don't always recognize them while you're inside them. This was something Dr. Siriporn had told me early in our work together, back when I was still raw from the William disaster and convinced that I would never be okay again.

"The pattern feels like instinct," she'd said, her voice carrying that particular calm that therapists cultivated like a professional skill. "It feels natural because you've done it so many times. The challenge is learning to see from outside of it."

I'd nodded at the time, thinking I understood. Thinking that recognition was the same as change. Now, lying on my bed at 2 AM with my phone in my hand and William's latest message glowing on the screen, I understood that recognition and change were not the same thing at all. Recognition was easy. Change was the part where you actually had to do something different.

William: The contractors say six months minimum for the full renovation. Lego says they're being pessimistic. I think he's being unrealistic.

A perfectly normal message. A perfectly friendly update about house restoration. There was nothing in those words that should have made my heart do anything interesting. And yet.

Est: Lego's optimism is a force of nature. Don't fight it.

William: I've learned that lesson. He showed up today with paint samples. Seventeen of them. I don't even know what rooms I'm painting yet.

Est: That sounds like Lego.

William: He also brought lunch. And opinions about window treatments. And a very detailed spreadsheet about plant care schedules for the garden.

Est: He really is a force of nature.

William: He's the best person I know. Don't tell him I said that.

I smiled at my phone like the disaster I was.

This was the pattern. This was exactly the pattern. The late-night conversations that felt intimate without being explicitly romantic. The small admissions that built a picture of someone's inner world. The gradual erosion of boundaries that had been

established for very good reasons.

I knew I was doing it. I could see myself doing it. And I kept doing it anyway.

Est: Your secret is safe.

William: Thank you. For talking to me. I know you don't have to.

Est: I like talking to you.

The admission sent before I could reconsider it. Honest. Dangerous. Exactly the kind of thing the old Est would have said—the Est who chased storms, who lost himself in unavailable people, who equated intensity with love.

Was I doing it again?

Was I falling back into the same trap, just with better self-awareness this time?

I set down my phone and stared at my ceiling. The resurrection plant sat on my windowsill, its green leaves reaching toward the streetlight filtering through my curtains. Beside it, the painting of my hands holding a rose—William's gift, his apology, his declaration of attention rendered in oil and canvas.

I'd kept it. Of course I'd kept it. I looked at it every morning, like a recovering addict keeping their substance of choice on display.

My phone buzzed again.

William: I like talking to you too. Goodnight, Est.

I didn't respond. That felt like a victory, somehow. A tiny assertion of independence in a sea of emotional capitulation.

I fell asleep with his words echoing in my head: I like talking to you too.

"Tell me about the texting." Dr. Siriporn's office was exactly as it always was—calming colors, comfortable furniture, the faint scent of lavender that she claimed was "just the cleaning products" but that I suspected was deliberately therapeutic. She sat across from me in her usual chair, her notebook open but her pen still, giving me her full attention.

"It's fine." I said automatically.

She waited.

The thing about therapists is that they're very good at waiting. They're trained in the particular kind of silence that makes you fill it, that makes you say the things

you'd been trying not to say. Dr. Siriporn was especially skilled at this. Her silence felt like an invitation rather than a judgment.

"It's not fine," I amended. "I don't know what it is."

"Can you describe what you're experiencing?"

I shifted on the couch, trying to organize my thoughts into something presentable.

"We've been texting. Every day, sometimes multiple times a day. It started professionally—he thanked me for the exhibition photos, I responded, and then it just... continued. We talk about everything now. His house renovation. His therapy progress. His friendship with Lego. What he's reading. What I'm photographing."

"And how does this make you feel?"

"Confused. Happy. Terrified." I ran a hand through my hair. "I can see myself falling into the pattern. The one we talked about—where I lose myself in someone else's chaos, where I make their needs more important than my own. I can see it happening, and I don't know how to stop it."

"Do you want to stop it?"

The question landed like a stone in still water.

"I don't know," I admitted. "That's the problem. Part of me thinks I should stop it. Should establish boundaries, keep things professional, protect myself. But another part of me..."

I trailed off.

"Another part of you?" Dr. Siriporn prompted gently.

"Another part of me thinks this might be different. That he might be different. He's done so much work since the breakdown. The exhibition, the therapy, the way he's reconnecting with people. He's not the same person who pushed me away."

"And what does that mean to you? That he's changed?"

"It means—" I stopped. Started again. "It means I don't know if the rules still apply. The rules I made to protect myself. They were about protecting myself from the old William. But if he's not the old William anymore..."

"Then you're not sure what you're protecting yourself from?"

"Exactly."

Dr. Siriporn made a note in her book, then set her pen down.

"Est, I want to ask you something, and I want you to really consider it before you answer." She leaned forward slightly, her expression kind but serious. "What would choosing yourself look like in this situation?"

"Keeping my distance," I said automatically. "Not getting pulled back in. Maintaining boundaries."

"Are you sure about that?"

I blinked. "Isn't that what we've been working on? Learning to not lose myself in other people?"

"Yes. But I want you to consider something." She paused, choosing her words carefully. "Has it occurred to you that choosing yourself might also mean choosing to be with someone? That the two aren't mutually exclusive?"

The words hit me like cold water.

"What do you mean?"

"You've learned important things over the past month. You've learned to recognize your patterns, to value your own needs, to stop equating your worth with someone else's approval. Those are genuine changes. They're part of who you are now."

"Right..."

"So the question isn't whether to be in a relationship or not. The question is: can you be in a relationship while still maintaining those changes? Can you choose someone and choose yourself at the same time?"

I stared at her, my mind racing.

"I don't know," I said finally. "I've never done that before. Every relationship I've had, I've lost myself. It's like I don't know how to love someone without disappearing."

"That was the pattern. But patterns can be broken." She smiled slightly. "You're already different, Est. The fact that you're aware of the pattern, that you're questioning it, that you came here to talk about it—that's already a change. The old Est wouldn't have done any of that."

"The old Est would have already moved into William's apartment and started planning their future." I said dryly.

"Probably. But you didn't do that. You're taking it slowly. You're being cautious. You're seeking professional guidance." She leaned back. "That's not falling into a pattern. That's doing something new."

"But I'm still texting him every day. I'm still thinking about him constantly. How is

that different from before?"

"Because before, you were running toward him without considering yourself. Now, you're standing still and asking questions. That's the difference. You're present in this, not just reactive."

I let her words settle into my chest.

"So what do I do?"

"You keep doing what you're doing. You stay aware. You communicate honestly—with me, with yourself, and with William. You allow yourself to want things without letting that wanting consume you."

"Is that possible?"

"It's the whole point of the work we've been doing." She smiled again. "You're allowed to want things, Est. The question is whether you can want them without losing yourself. And the only way to find out is to try."

The days after my therapy session passed in a strange blur of work and waiting. Nut had been sharing my exhibition photos widely, and the response was overwhelming. Gallery owners were reaching out, publications were asking about features, other artists were requesting my services. My inbox was fuller than it had been in years, full of opportunities I'd dreamed about during the long months of creative stagnation.

One email in particular caught my attention—a gallery in the art district, one of the prestigious ones that I'd passed a hundred times without ever imagining my work might hang inside.

Subject: Exhibition Inquiry – Est Sangaworawong

Dear Est,

We've been following your documentation of the "Absence & Light" exhibition with great interest. Your photographs capture something rare—an intimacy and emotional honesty that transforms documentation into art itself.

We would be interested in discussing the possibility of exhibiting your work. Not as documentation, but as photography in its own right.

Please contact us at your earliest convenience.

I read the email three times, certain I was misunderstanding something. Galleries didn't reach out to photographers who documented other people's exhibitions. That wasn't how it worked. You built a portfolio, you applied, you faced rejection after

rejection until someone decided to take a chance on you. But here it was. An invitation. A door opening.

I forwarded the email to Nut with a message: Is this real?

His response came within minutes: EXTREMELY REAL. I know these people. They're legit. EST YOU'RE HAPPENING.

I sat back in my chair, trying to process.

This was what I'd wanted. What I'd been working toward for years. My own exhibition. My own work, valued for itself, not just as documentation of someone else's vision.

And it had come from photographing William.

The irony wasn't lost on me. The photos that were opening doors were the ones I'd taken while struggling with my feelings, while navigating complicated emotional territory, while trying to figure out how to be in the same room as someone I was still learning to not love.

They'd captured something because I was feeling something. The emotion had made them better, not worse.

Maybe that was the lesson. Maybe intensity and quality weren't opposites. Maybe you could feel things deeply and still do good work. Maybe—My phone buzzed.

William: I hope your day is going well.

Simple. Normal. The kind of message that could mean anything or nothing.

I smiled despite myself.

Est: Better than expected, actually. Got some good news about my photography.

William: Tell me.

Est: A gallery wants to exhibit my photos. As art, not documentation.

William: Est, that's incredible. Congratulations.

William: You deserve this.

William: Your work is extraordinary.

Three messages in quick succession, genuine enthusiasm bleeding through the screen. I could imagine him typing them, that focused expression he got when he was saying something he really meant.

Est: Thank you. It feels surreal.

William: It shouldn't. You've been doing the work. You've been showing up. This is what happens when you show up.

I stared at his words, feeling something complicated in my chest.

He was right. I had been doing the work. All those months of therapy, of rebuilding, of learning to see myself clearly—they hadn't been wasted. They were leading somewhere. They were leading here.

Est: When did you become so wise?

William: Extensive therapy. And the company of a nineteen-year-old who refuses to let me be pessimistic.

Est: Lego has that effect.

William: He really does.

A pause. The three dots appeared, disappeared, appeared again.

William: I have therapy tomorrow. Afternoon session. I might be quiet afterward.

The admission was unexpected. Vulnerable in a way that caught me off guard.

Est: Heavy stuff?

William: My father. Old things. Things I've been avoiding.

Est: That sounds hard.

William: It will be. But necessary, I think.

I hesitated, my thumbs hovering over the keyboard. The old Est would have offered to be there, would have made himself available, would have tried to be the support system William needed. But I wasn't the old Est. I was someone who was learning boundaries, who was practicing not disappearing into other people's needs.

Est: Good luck. I'll be here if you want to talk after. But no pressure either way.

William: Thank you. That means more than you know.

William went quiet the next day. I noticed, of course I noticed. After weeks of constant communication, the silence was deafening. I checked my phone more times than I wanted to admit, looking for messages that didn't come, trying to convince myself that it was fine. He'd warned me. He'd told me he might need space.

This was me practicing boundaries. This was me not chasing someone who needed

distance.

It was also excruciating.

I threw myself into work instead. Edited more exhibition photos. Responded to the gallery inquiry. Started planning what a potential exhibition of my own might look like. Anything to keep my hands busy and my mind occupied.

It didn't work. I kept thinking about what he might be processing, what his father might have done or said, what wounds he was reopening in that therapy room. I wanted to reach out. Wanted to ask if he was okay. Wanted to be there, even if "there" was just a text message saying I was thinking of him. But that wasn't what he'd asked for. He'd asked for space, and I was going to give it to him.

This was growth. This was change. This was the new Est, the one who could want things without letting that wanting control him.

It felt terrible.

The silence lasted almost exactly twenty-four hours. I was editing photos when my phone finally buzzed—a single message that made my heart clench:

William: Sorry for disappearing. Hard day. I'm okay.

I set down my editing tablet and picked up the phone, staring at the words. So simple. So minimal. But underneath them, I could sense the weight of whatever he'd been through.

Est: You don't have to apologize. Hard days are allowed.

William: I'm still learning that.

Est: So am I.

A pause. Then:

William: Can I call you?

My heart did something complicated.

Est: Yes.

The phone rang thirty seconds later. I answered on the second ring, which was probably too eager but also too late to change.

"Hi." I said, my voice coming out softer than I intended.

"Hi." His voice was rough, like he'd been crying or like he hadn't slept. Maybe both.



"Thank you for answering."

"I said I would."

"I know. I just—" He stopped, and I heard him take a breath. "I wasn't sure if you'd still want to. After I went quiet."

"William." I settled onto my bed, cradling the phone against my ear. "You told me you might need space. You took space. That's not something to apologize for."

"It feels like something to apologize for. The old me would have ghosted for weeks, not hours. Would have convinced myself that silence was easier than honesty."

"But you didn't do that."

"No. I didn't." He laughed slightly, a sound without much humor in it. "Progress, apparently."

"Do you want to talk about it? The therapy session?"

A long pause. I could hear him breathing, could imagine him in his apartment—that glass tower that used to be his prison, now slowly becoming something else.

"My father," he said finally. "We talked about my father. About how he handled my mother's death. About how he remarried so quickly, started a new family so quickly, like he was trying to erase everything that came before."

"That must have been painful."

"It was. Is." Another breath. "But Dr. Chaisri said something that stuck with me. He said that my father's response to grief wasn't about me—it was about my father. That some people rebuild quickly because they can't stand the emptiness, because staying in the pain feels like dying. He said that understanding that doesn't make it okay, but it might make it... survivable."

"Do you believe that?"

"I'm trying to. It's hard to separate what he did from how it made me feel. The abandonment. The sense that I wasn't enough to stay for. The way he just—moved on, like our family had never existed."

My chest ached for him. I knew something about absent fathers, about the particular wound of being left behind.

"You know it wasn't about you, right?" I said quietly. "His leaving—it was about his own inability to cope. Not about your worth."

"I know that intellectually. The emotional part is slower."

"Yeah. That part is always slower."

We sat in silence for a moment, but it wasn't uncomfortable. It felt like companionship—two people who understood something about each other's pain, holding space without needing to fill it.

"Thank you," William said finally. "For listening. For not—I don't know. For not running away when I showed you this part."

"Why would I run away?"

"Because it's messy. Because I'm not the version of myself I want to be yet. Because —" He stopped.

"Because?"

"Because people leave when things get hard. That's what I've learned. That's what I'm trying to unlearn."

The admission hung in the air between us.

"I'm not leaving," I said, and the words surprised me with their certainty. "I don't know what we're doing, William. I don't know where this is going or what it means. But I'm not leaving. Not because of this."

"You mean that?"

"I mean that."

Another silence. This one felt different—charged with something I couldn't name.

"The exhibition," William said, his voice shifting slightly. "You're coming back to photograph it tomorrow?"

"Yes. Weekly documentation of the public response."

"I'll be there."

My heart rate picked up. "You will?"

"The gallery director asked me to make an appearance. Apparently the 'reclusive artist actually present' angle helps with press coverage." He laughed again, and this time there was real humor in it. "I'm not sure how I feel about being a marketing strategy."

"Welcome to the art world."

"It's terrible. Why do we do this?"

"Because we can't not."

"That's the problem with loving things," he said softly. "They become necessary, even when they hurt."

I wasn't sure if we were still talking about art.

"I should let you sleep," I said, because one of us needed to be the responsible one. "You've had a hard day."

"I have. But talking to you made it better."

"William..."

"I know. I'm not supposed to say things like that. Too honest. Too fast."

"No, it's not—" I paused, trying to find the right words. "It's not too fast. It's just—I'm trying to be careful. With myself. With you. With whatever this is."

"I know. I'm trying too." He was quiet for a moment. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

"You'll see me tomorrow."

"Goodnight, Est."

"Goodnight, William."

I hung up and lay back on my bed, staring at the ceiling.

I'm not leaving.

I'd said that. I'd meant it. And I wasn't sure if that was growth or just the pattern reasserting itself in new clothing. But for the first time, I wasn't sure it mattered. Maybe the difference between growth and pattern wasn't about the actions themselves—it was about the awareness you brought to them. Maybe you could do the same thing and have it mean something completely different, depending on why you were doing it.

I was choosing to stay. Not because I was lost in him, not because his attention validated my worth, but because I wanted to. Because I was learning to want things without disappearing into them. Because I was present in this, not just reactive.

That had to count for something.

Didn't it?

The gallery looked different in daylight. The dramatic lighting that had transformed William's paintings into something otherworldly was replaced by soft natural light filtering through skylights. The space felt less like a temple and more like what it

actually was—a room full of art, waiting to be seen.

I arrived early, as I always did. The habit of preparation that had gotten me through so many professional situations—arrive before anyone else, map the space, find the angles, become invisible before you needed to be. My camera bag was a familiar weight on my shoulder, and the ritual of checking my equipment grounded me in the practical realities of work.

I wasn't here to see William. I was here to photograph an exhibition. Professional. Detached. Documentarian.

The fact that he would also be here was incidental.

Completely incidental.

I started with the entrance, capturing the way the morning light fell across the "Absence & Light" lettering. Then I moved through the gallery systematically, photographing the paintings from different angles, the way the crowds had left subtle marks on the floor, the small changes that a week of public attention had wrought.

It was good to have work to focus on. It was good to have a camera between me and everything else.

I was photographing one of the chaos pieces—a particularly violent swirl of reds and blacks that I'd learned represented William's worst night of grief—when I felt it.

The particular awareness that comes when someone is watching you.

I lowered my camera and turned.

William was standing in the gallery entrance.

He looked—different. Better than the last time I'd seen him, at the exhibition opening. The dark circles under his eyes had faded. His posture was more relaxed. He was wearing something casual—jeans and a soft sweater—instead of the formal suit he'd worn before. He looked like someone who had rested, who had processed, who was slowly learning to be a person again.

He also looked like he wasn't expecting me to be here yet.

"Est." His voice was slightly startled. "I thought you weren't coming until eleven."

"I always come early." I raised my camera slightly, a shield. "Force of habit."

"Right. Of course." He glanced around the gallery, as if unsure what to do with himself. "I should have texted. Let you know I was coming."

"You didn't have to."

"I wanted to. But I kept—" He stopped, laughing slightly. "I kept thinking of reasons why it would be strange. Like I needed an excuse to tell you my schedule."

"You don't need an excuse."

"I'm learning that."

We stood there, separated by fifteen feet of gallery floor and three months of complicated history. The morning light made everything look soft and slightly unreal.

"I should—" I gestured at my camera. "I should keep working."

"Of course. Don't let me interrupt."

"You're not interrupting."

"I'm standing in your gallery staring at you like a creep. That's definitely interrupting."

I laughed before I could stop myself. When had William become funny? Or had he always been funny, and I'd just been too overwhelmed by everything else to notice?

"You're not a creep. You're the artist. You're supposed to be here."

"I'm not sure I know how to 'be here' yet. Being in public still feels like wearing someone else's skin."

"Does it help if I tell you that you look comfortable? In your own skin, I mean."

He considered this. "It helps. A little."

I raised my camera again, but I didn't take a picture. I just—looked. Let myself see him through the lens, the way I had during those early sessions. The way his features composed themselves, the particular quality of his presence.

He was beautiful. That hadn't changed. But there was something different now—a solidity that hadn't been there before. Like he was more present in his own body, more grounded in the space he occupied.

"What are you seeing?" he asked softly.

"I'm not sure yet." I lowered the camera. "But it's good. Whatever it is, it's good."

The gallery director found William eventually, pulling him away for a conversation about scheduling and press inquiries. I used the opportunity to escape deeper into the exhibition, photographing the pieces I'd been avoiding.

The alcove where "I'm Sorry" hung was quiet. The portrait was tucked away from the main gallery, given its own space and its own lighting, as if the curator had understood that it required contemplation rather than quick viewing.

I stood in front of it for a long time.

Est's face—my face—looked back at me. Half-rendered in charcoal, caught between sketch and painting. The eyes were the most detailed part, amber hints around the irises, the particular way I looked when I was genuinely curious about something. But the color had never been added. The portrait had been left deliberately incomplete.

I'm Sorry.

Two words that meant everything. An apology rendered in oil and canvas, hung in a public gallery for strangers to interpret.

I raised my camera and started photographing. Not because I needed more documentation photos—I had plenty from the opening night—but because it felt like the only way to process what I was seeing. Through the lens, with that distance between me and the image, I could look at it without being overwhelmed.

Or so I thought.

"I still don't know what to do with this one."

William's voice came from behind me. I hadn't heard him approach.

I lowered my camera but didn't turn around. "Neither do I."

"That's why it's unfinished." He moved to stand beside me, both of us facing the portrait. "I couldn't—I didn't know how to complete it. What color to make you. What expression you'd be wearing at the end."

"What do you mean, what expression?"

"Paintings tell stories. They have beginnings and endings, even when they're just portraits." He was quiet for a moment. "I didn't know what ending we had. Whether you'd be looking at me with forgiveness or anger or indifference. So I left it. Left you suspended in that moment of... possibility."

"That's—" I stopped, swallowed. "That's a lot to put in a painting."

"That's what art does. It holds the things we can't say."

I finally turned to look at him. He was still watching the portrait, his expression complicated.

"Do you know now?" I asked. "What ending we have?"

"No." He met my eyes. "I'm hoping we're still writing it."

The words hung between us, heavy with implication.

"William—"

"I know. Too much, too fast. I'm working on it."

"No, that's not—" I took a breath. "I was going to say: I hope so too."

His expression shifted—surprise, then something softer.

"You do?"

"I don't know what this is. What we're doing. But I'm not ready for it to have an ending yet."

The admission felt dangerous in my mouth. Too honest. Too vulnerable. But I'd promised myself to be present in this, not just reactive, and presence required honesty.

"The portrait stays unfinished then," William said quietly. "Until we know."

"That feels right."

We stood in silence, looking at the incomplete version of my face.

"Can I—" William started, then stopped. Started again. "Can I ask you something?"

"Yes."

"Would you want to see the house? My mother's house. The renovation progress." He was speaking quickly, the words tumbling over each other. "I know that's probably strange. We're still figuring out what we are. But Lego's been working on the garden, and the contractors started last week, and I keep wanting to show someone who isn't—who isn't Lego or my manager or someone being paid to care."

The invitation was unexpected. Intimate in a way that professional collaboration wasn't.

"I'd like that." I said.

"You would?"

"I would. Actually—" I hesitated, then pushed forward. "I want to help. With the house. If you'd let me."

"Help how?"

"Document it. The restoration process. Before and after. The story of bringing

something back to life." I raised my camera slightly. "It's selfish, actually. I think it would make a beautiful project. And I'd get to spend time with you."

The honesty felt terrifying and liberating at once.

William stared at me. "You want to document the renovation?"

"Yes."

"As a photography project?"

"Partly. And partly because—" I stopped, then made myself continue. "Because it matters to you. And I want to understand the things that matter to you."

Something shifted in his expression—a vulnerability that made my chest ache.

"Est..."

"You can say no. If it's too much. If I'm pushing too hard."

"No. It's not—" He laughed slightly, a sound that was almost disbelieving. "It's not too much. It's the opposite. It's exactly—" He stopped, shook his head. "Yes. Yes, I'd like that. I'd like that very much."

"Okay."

"Okay."

We stood there, the unfinished portrait behind us, something new and fragile taking shape in the space between.

The rest of the morning passed in the strange limbo of working and watching. I photographed the gallery while William did his artist duties—meeting with the director, answering questions from a journalist who had shown up hoping for a quote, being the public version of himself that this return to the art world required. But I was hyperaware of him the entire time. Every time I raised my camera, I knew exactly where he was in the room. Every time I adjusted my position, I tracked his movement through the space.

It was ridiculous. Unprofessional. Exactly the kind of thing I'd been trying to avoid. But I couldn't seem to stop.

And the strange thing was: he was doing it too.

Every time I looked up from my camera, I caught him looking away—a glance that had just ended, an attention that was being redirected. We were orbiting each other, drawn together by some gravitational force we were both trying to resist. Or



maybe not resist. Maybe just—navigate. With care.

Around noon, the gallery started to fill with the day's visitors, and my documentation work shifted to capturing the public response. Strangers examining William's grief, commenting on his technique, interpreting his pain through the lens of their own experiences. It was fascinating and slightly voyeuristic, watching people engage with art they didn't know had been created in isolation and desperation.

William moved through the crowd like he'd been doing it his whole life—which, I realized, he probably had, before the isolation. He'd been a rising star in the art world once. He'd attended openings and exhibitions and schmoozing events. This persona—the gracious artist, the accessible genius—was one he'd worn before. But I could see the cracks. The way his smile didn't quite reach his eyes after the tenth conversation. The slight tension in his shoulders when someone touched his arm. The moments when he'd glance toward the exit like he was calculating escape routes.

He was doing it. He was surviving it. But it was costing him something.

I found myself wishing I could do something to help. Take the pressure off somehow. Give him a moment to breathe. Instead, I photographed. Because that was my job. Because that was what I knew how to do.

Around one o'clock, there was a brief lull—the morning visitors leaving for lunch, the afternoon crowd not yet arrived. William took the opportunity to escape toward the back of the gallery, and I found myself following before I could talk myself out of it.

He was standing in front of his mother's portrait.

The largest piece in the exhibition—a stunning rendering of a woman surrounded by flowers, her smile warm and knowing, her eyes carrying something I recognized from photos of my own mother. The particular love of a parent looking at their child. The particular pride.

"She would have liked this," William said without turning around. He'd known I was there. "Not the exhibition itself—she always said art openings were ridiculous. Too much wine and too little actual art appreciation."

I smiled despite myself. "She sounds like she had opinions."

"She had very strong opinions. About everything. Art, food, the proper way to grow orchids." He paused. "She would have liked you."

"You think so?"

"I know so. She always said I needed someone who could see through me. Who wouldn't let me hide." He finally turned to face me. "You see through me."

"Is that a compliment?"

"It's terrifying. But yes."

We stood there, in front of his mother's portrait, something unspoken building in the air between us.

"I was going to—" William started.

Then his phone buzzed.

He glanced at it, and his expression shifted—politeness replacing whatever vulnerability had been there.

"The journalist. She has more questions. I need to—"

"Go. Of course."

He hesitated, like there was more he wanted to say. Then the phone buzzed again, and the moment was gone.

"I'll see you soon?" he asked.

"You'll see me soon."

He walked away, and I was left standing in front of his mother's portrait, my heart doing something complicated in my chest.

The message came that evening, after I'd gotten home and processed my photos and eaten dinner and done all the normal things a person does when they're not obsessing over a text conversation.

William: I was going to ask if you wanted to get coffee.

I stared at the screen.

Est: When?

William: At the gallery. Before the journalist interrupted. I was working up the courage, and then she appeared with her recorder, and the moment was gone.

Est: You were working up courage?

William: Asking people to coffee is hard. What if you said no?

Est: What if I said yes?

William: Then I would have been terrified for different reasons.

I laughed, alone in my apartment, at the absurdity of two grown adults navigating something this simple with this much anxiety.

Est: Ask me next time.

William: Next time?

Est: When you see me. At the gallery. Or the house. Or wherever. Ask me.

A long pause. The three dots appearing and disappearing multiple times.

William: And if I ask?

Est: I might say yes.

William: Might?

Est: There's only one way to find out.

I could imagine him on the other end—in his apartment, maybe on his couch, his face lit by phone screen. That particular expression he got when he was uncertain but hopeful, when he was taking a risk he wasn't sure would pay off.

William: You're not making this easy.

Est: Should it be easy?

William: No. I suppose not. Nothing worthwhile is.

Est: Then ask me next time. And we'll see.

Another pause.

William: I will.

William: Goodnight, Est.

Est: Goodnight, William.

I set down my phone and looked around my apartment. The resurrection plant on the windowsill. The painting of my hands on the small table. The space I'd built during the months of recovery, the sanctuary that had helped me learn to be alone.

Was I falling again?

Maybe. Probably.

But it felt different this time. Less like falling and more like—choosing. Deliberately. With awareness. With all the tools I'd learned in therapy, all the self-knowledge I'd accumulated through pain and reflection.

I was choosing to be here. Choosing to engage. Choosing to risk.

And maybe that was the difference. Maybe the pattern wasn't about the actions themselves, but about the intention behind them. Maybe you could fall in love without falling apart, if you remembered to keep your feet on the ground.

I smiled at my ceiling—the same ceiling I'd stared at during so many sleepless nights, when William's absence had felt like a wound that would never heal.

"You're doing something new," I told myself. "This is what something new feels like."

Terrifying. Uncertain. Full of possibility.

I closed my eyes, and for the first time in weeks, I fell asleep thinking about the future instead of the past.